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SUBJECT: KINSHASA INCREASINGLY IN THE DARK

¶1. (U) Summary. Increasingly frequent power blackouts and water shortages are plaguing Kinshasa and other provinces in the DRC, sparking growing public unhappiness. Poorly maintained equipment, insufficient capital investment and mismanagement are among the causes cited. In late March Parliament summoned the executives of the national electricity and water authorities (respectively SNEL and REGIDESO) for questioning about these problems, and on April 28, the GDRC dismissed these management teams. End Summary.

¶2. (U) For at least the past six months, power outages have become increasingly severe in Kinshasa, particularly during the weekends. Congolese media has also reported frequent outages in nearly all other provinces, although only an estimated six to seven percent of the Congolese population even has access to electricity. Electrical cuts occur several times per day in all parts of Kinshasa; one Econ LES counted more than eight outages in his home during the May 5-6 weekend. Further, these outages normally do not follow the schedule that the DRC's electricity parastatal (SNEL) occasionally announces in advance. Water shortages and decreased water pressure are also increasing in Kinshasa and throughout the DRC. For example, an Econ LES often only has running water in his home between 2 and 3 am, and in April parts of Kinshasa went several days without water. There is growing public and private criticism of the situation in Kinshasa, reflecting popular frustration that nothing seems to be happening in the post-election period to bring improvements to the general population.

¶3. (U) SNEL officials attribute these problems to aging and vandalized equipment and inadequate funds to replace or restore equipment and renovate and construct hydroelectric plants and distribution stations. Electricity shortages in turn reduce REGIDESO's capacity to treat and distribute water, which is then exacerbated in Kinshasa by an ongoing donor-funded renovation of a processing and purification plant. Both SNEL and REGIDESO are indeed dealing with decrepit infrastructure, suffering from decades of neglect. Both are also characterized, like other state enterprises, by a long history of poor management and corruption.

¶4. (U) In response to the growing power and water shortages, National Assembly members held a hearing at the end of March to question the SNEL and REGIDESO CEOs and Boards of Directors. The management teams were unable to satisfactorily respond to the Parliamentary inquiry, according to contacts of an AID LES, and on April 28, the Ministers of Portfolio and Energy (the ministries have political and technical oversight of these agencies) replaced the parastatal's management teams with interim leadership.

Comment

15. (U) Sacrifice of the management teams was clearly designed to respond to public unrest. Inevitably, rumors also abound about the reasons for the abrupt dismissals, the first of their kind in a very long time. The upper management of both companies, like other parastatals, was set during the DRC Transition, which allocated slots to the various Transition parties. It is no coincidence that the dismissed management teams were dominated by members of parties not affiliated with the governing presidential coalition or Prime Minister's office. The GDRC clearly wants to convey a message it is now holding officials accountable for their actions and failures, particularly in priority sectors. Broad reforms to the public sector companies, however, will be required to effect needed change. Follow-up actions regarding these two highly-visible and important companies will be an indicator of the new post-election government's will and ability to start to come to grips with fundamental issues. End comment.
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